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SUBSTANTIAL WINTERING POPULATIONS OF THE BASRA REED WARBLER *ACROCEPHALUS GRISELDIS* IN EASTERN KENYA

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The Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* breeds in marshes along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Iraq (Vaurie 1959) and winters in eastern Africa. Up to 1970, however, it was known south of the Sahara from a mere fifteen records, involving one to two individuals each, from Eritrea south to Malawi, and west to Uganda (Urban & Brown 1971, Pearson 1972, Backhurst, Britton & Mann 1973, Benson & Benson 1977). Ash (1978) has since recorded the species regularly from late August to early December in Ethiopia. Recent records have also provided evidence of significant wintering areas in the southern tropics. Thus, since 1971, the species has been encountered regularly on southward passage at Ngulia Safari Lodge, Kenya, where 250 grounded birds had been ringed up to 1977 on dates from 27 October to 13 January, many of them carrying substantial fat reserves (Pearson & Backhurst 1976, Backhurst & Pearson 1977). In southern Malawi, D.B. Hanmer (1976 and *in litt.*) has recently netted the species regularly between mid November and early April, while nearby at Chire, Mozambique (16°42'S.) Ash (1978) has reported the recovery of an Ethiopian ringed individual; further south, at Mopeia (*c.*18°S.) Clancey (1975) reports on two specimens collected in December and January.

Apart from Ngulia records the sum total of published East African occurrences of the Basra Reed Warbler comprises those listed by Backhurst *et al.* (1973) and Pearson (1972), together with a further seven, all from south-eastern Kenya between 1971-76, listed by the EANHS Ornithological Sub-Committee (1977). To these can be added recent unpublished records from Bamburi, near Mombasa in November-December (4) and April (1), all ringed by H.A.B. and P.L.B., and another December 1976 Voi bird (P.C. Lack and D.J.P.). Thus, there were only 23 dated records away from Ngulia Lodge, involving 25 individuals, known to us to the end of 1977. Thirteen of these, dated November to early January, and another three in April, probably refer to passage birds. This leaves only seven East African records likely to involve wintering, all from Kenya (Naivasha, Mtito Andei and Kilifi) and eastern Tanzania (Tanga and Kilosa).

Early in 1978 we recorded Basra Reed Warblers from four localities in eastern Kenya, and discovered two wintering populations, one of which appeared to consist of hundreds of birds. An individual netted by H.A.B. in coastal scrub at Bamburi on 2 January may have been on passage, but another, caught at this site on 1 February, and completing wing moult, was almost certainly wintering. On 4 March we obtained good views of a

bird skulking low in bushes on the edge of swamp at Lake Shakababo in the Tana delta. Late the same day, several more were found in an area of 1-2 m high *Suaeda monoica* bushes over brackish water and recently dried mud at Karawa, on the southern edge of the Tana delta, virtually on the coast.

On the morning of 5 March it became apparent that the Basra Reed Warbler was the most abundant Palaearctic species in the Karawa *Suaeda*, throughout which it was present at an estimated density of 10-20 birds per ha. A few Sedge Warblers *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* and unidentified *Luscinia*, and a single singing Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*, were the only other migrants found in the same habitat. Most Basra Reed Warblers seen were glimpsed only briefly as they dived across paths and round bushes, but with such views the cold olive-brown upperparts, and rather long dark tail were usually conspicuous. Several good views were obtained, however, of birds perched in the open. The long fine bill, very white underparts with unstreaked throat, prominent whitish eyestripe and dark grey legs were then the most noticeable features which together distinguished this from other unstreaked migrant *Acrocephalus* species. In size, the bird gave the impression of a large Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus* rather than a small Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus*, and lacked the heavy appearance of the latter. Birds were quite vocal. The call note was a harsh *'chaaar'*, stronger than, but similar to that of a Reed Warbler. Song was heard quite frequently during both morning and afternoon. This consisted of a rather subdued rhythmic sequence of low notes, which lacked the strident quality of Reed Warbler song, and recalled greenbul notes in tone. It was altogether less powerful than the song of a Great Reed Warbler, and lacked the guttural grating and croaking notes characteristic of that species.

More Basra Reed Warblers were found by D.J.P. on 19 March at Garissa. Birds were heard calling and singing, and two were seen, in dense bushes over flooded mud on the Tana floodplain. At least 20 birds were present in an area of a few hectares, and it was noticeable that these were confined to wet patches.

The Karawa site was revisited by P.L.B. on 1 April. The birds were still present and singing, although numbers were judged to be rather less than in early March. Two were caught and ringed; these were found to be very fat, and weighed 24.2 and 29.3 g respectively. At Ngulia in November-December the weights of lean birds are mostly in the range 15-17 g, and the fattest caught there have weighed 21-23.5 g. In Malawi, winter weights have ranged 15-21 g (D.B. Hanmer *in litt.*), whilst four Kenyan late January - February weights ranged 17.5-19.6 g. The April Karawa birds, caught shortly before spring departure, probably had at least 7 g and 12 g respectively of expendable fat reserves. Using Nisbet, Drury & Keith's (1963) results, it can be estimated that the heavier bird at least should have been capable of a direct flight to Iraq.

Clearly the Basra Reed Warbler winters in Kenya more abundantly than pre-1978 records had indicated. Numbers at Karawa must have run into several hundreds. The seasonally flooded *Suaeda* habitat they occupied covers at least 50 ha here, and probably exists in other littoral parts of the Tana delta. Further up the Tana, Garissa is presumably just one of the suitable localities where the species occurs. Other major undiscovered wintering areas might well be associated with the Kenya coast northeast of the Tana, and the rivers of southern Somalia.

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THE EFFECTS OF LATITUDE AND ALTITUDE ON BIRD WEIGHTS

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This paper compares bird weights from Mopeia, Zambezi delta, Mozambique (17°56'S., 35°37'E.), altitude 12 m and Nchalo, Lower Shire Valley, Malawi (16°16'S., 34°55'E.), altitude 60 m, with those discussed by Britton (1977) from western and coastal Kenya. The climate of Nchalo and Mopeia are similar although Nchalo has a lower rainfall, lower humidity and a slightly higher mean annual temperature. No specimens have been collected but it is likely that the same subspecies occur in both areas, except that in *Tchagra senegala* [1], *Camaroptera brachyura* and *Lonchura cucullata*, authorities differ on the amount of subspeciation, if any, shown by birds from the two localities (Benson & Benson 1977, Clancey 1971, SAOS List Committee 1969).

[1] English names are given in Table 1.